

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, comprising:

a flexible riser; and

protection means configured to protect the riser from impact when the riser is connected to the vessel, the protection means being submerged below the vessel and covering at least an upper part of the riser and terminating above the sea bed when the riser is submerged and connected to the vessel, the ~~protecting~~ protection means being formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other such that they are movable with respect to each other in a lateral and axial direction, the separate units arranged to be movable in transverse direction with respect to the riser, the ~~protecting~~ protection means further being provided with a stretching means or a tensioning means attached to a lower end of the protection means,

wherein the riser in the vicinity of the stretching or tensioning means is provided with a collar designed to reduce detrimental impact of the stretching or tensioning means on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching or tensioning means with respect to the riser.

2. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the ~~riser~~ protection means is temporarily suspended from the vessel.

3. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the ~~riser~~ protection means is suspended from a submerged turret loading buoy.

4. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is formed by an annular body surrounding the flexible riser.

5. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is moored to the sea bed by means of wires.

6. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means at the lower end of its interior surface is provided with a curved surface opposing an outer surface of the collar designed to reduce detrimental impact or wear and tear on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching means.

7. (Cancelled).

8. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means are suspended by means of chains or wires carrying the ~~riser~~ protection means.

9. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the ~~riser protection means is formed by~~ plurality of separate units comprise a plurality of separate hollow elements, each being suspended by means of chains or lines.

10. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements are truncated and conical with a smaller upper diameter and a larger lower diameter or vice versa.

11. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements forming the ~~riser~~ protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

12. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the ~~riser~~ protection means is completely retractable into a sheltered position on the vessel.

13. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements are provided with an internally coating or friction reducing layer in order to minimize friction or load impact between the riser and the protection means, enabling the riser to move freely within the ~~riser~~ protection means.

14. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein each hollow element, at a wider edge of the hollow element, is provided with a stacking ridge enabling the hollow element to be stacked on a next element.

15. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 10, wherein the hollow elements forming the ~~riser~~ protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

16. (Cancelled).

17. (Previously Presented) A loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, comprising:  
a vessel floating at a sea surface; and  
a flexible riser system comprising:  
a flexible riser; and  
protection means connected to the vessel configured to protect the riser from impact, the protection means being submerged below the vessel and covering at least an upper part of the riser, and terminating above the sea bed, the protection means being formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other such that they are movable with respect to each other in a transverse and axial direction, the separate units arranged to be movable in transverse direction with respect to the riser, and a stretching means or a tensioning means arranged at a lower end of the protection means.

18. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the ~~riser~~ protection means is temporarily suspended from the vessel.

19. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the ~~riser~~ protection means is suspended from a submerged turret loading buoy.

20. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is formed by an annular body surrounding the flexible riser.

21. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is moored to the sea bed by means of wires.

22. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means at the lower end of its interior surface is provided with a curved surface designed to reduce detrimental impact or wear and tear on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching means.

23. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser in the vicinity of the stretching or tensioning means is provided with a collar designed to reduce detrimental impact on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching or tension means with respect to the riser.

24. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is suspended by means of chains or wires carrying the riser protection.

25. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the ~~riser protection means is formed by~~ plurality of separate units comprise a plurality of separate hollow elements, each being suspended by means of chains or lines.

26. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements are truncated and conical with a smaller upper diameter and a larger lower diameter or vice versa.

27. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements forming the ~~riser~~ protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

28. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the ~~riser~~ protection means is completely retractable into a sheltered position on the vessel.

29. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements are provided with an internally coating or friction reducing layer in order to minimize friction or load impact between the riser and the protection means, enabling the riser to move freely within the ~~riser~~ protection means.

30. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein each hollow element, at a wider edge of the hollow element, is provided with a stacking ridge enabling the hollow element to be stacked on a next element.

31. (Currently Amended) A loading system according to claim 26, wherein the hollow elements forming the ~~riser~~ protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

32. (Cancelled).

33. (Currently Amended) A method of operating a flexible riser system for a loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, the flexible riser system having a flexible riser and a protection means formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other ~~and a stretching means or a tensioning means~~ such that they are movable with respect to each other in a lateral and axial direction, the separate units arranged to be movable in transverse direction with respect to the riser, the protection means further being provided with a stretching means or a tensioning means attached to a lower end of the protection means, the method comprising:

transferring hydrocarbons between the sea bed installation and the vessel while the protection means is connected to the vessel and submerged below the vessel, such that the protection means covers at least an upper part of the riser and such that both the plurality of separate units and the stretching or tensioning means are disposed above the sea bed, the protection means arranged to protect the riser from impact.

34. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 33 further comprising:

retracting the protection means to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is not operating to transfer hydrocarbons between the sea bed installation and the vessel.